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The Third Generations: Grandchildren of Survivors, Grandchildren of Perpetrators, and Holocaust Memory

Excerpt from Chapter 1: "It was always there, floating around"¹: Survivor and Perpetrator Families Narrate the Holocaust

Johannes Spohr had a conversation about the Nazi era with his grandfather for the first time when he was studying for a degree in history in his twenties. Growing up in Lübeck, Germany, until that point, the main information Johannes had heard from his grandparents about World War II was a single line from his grandmother: "It was really horrible then." Johannes assumed his grandmother was referring to the hunger they experienced at the end of the war, but, he admitted, "what she meant is to this day unclear to me." In this initial conversation, Johannes's grandfather claimed that he was opposed to the war and only served as an officer in the Wehrmacht because he had no other choice. When Johannes tried to broach the topic a second time, his grandfather was unwilling to delve into the past further. After telling his mother, Bettina, about this situation, Johannes's takeaway was, "I must be satisfied with the usual 'two or three stories.'"² Johannes understood that if he wanted more details about his grandfather's involvement in the Nazi regime, he would have to look elsewhere.

This opportunity arose after Johannes's grandparents both passed away. When Johannes and Bettina cleaned out his grandparents' house, they found a box of albums and other

¹ Simon, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 14, 2024.

² Johannes Spohr, "Ball gegen die Auffahrt: Zwischen Goethe, Jünger und OKH-Treffen," in *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaften: Nachwirkungen in Gesellschaft und Familie*, ed. Oliver von Wrochem and Christine Eckel (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2016), 493-494.

memorabilia from the Nazi era. Bettina was shocked, as she had thought that her father had made a clean break with this past at the end of the war. Because of finding these materials, at Johannes's recommendation, Bettina attended seminars at the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg about researching and grappling with having a perpetrator in the family. Through these seminars, Bettina thought about her relationship with her father and determined that although he had been a criminal, she still loved him. Bettina was appreciative of the fact that through Johannes, she had learned to question the stories her father had told her about the past. While Bettina wrestled with the significance of her father's commitment to the Nazi regime, Johannes used the materials they found as a springboard to intensively research exactly what his grandfather had done during the war. Reflecting on the relationship mother and son had built through the experience of uncovering and discussing their family history, Bettina said, "We understand each other."³

Johannes's experience of learning about his grandfather's Nazi past thus had several layers. From the perpetrator generation, there was the one sentence his grandmother repeated about the war, his grandfather's refusal to discuss his involvement with the Nazis, and the material evidence of their past that they left behind. Bettina, a member of the second generation, trusted her parents' narratives. Johannes's critical approach to the past inspired Bettina to reassess her previous assumptions, which created a stronger mother-son relationship. These varying levels of talking and not talking about family history shaped how Johannes framed

³ *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaft in der eigenen Familie: Erinnerungsberichte der zweiten und dritten Generation*, directed by Jürgen Kinter and Oliver von Wrochem (2015; Hamburg, KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme). Bettina and Johannes Spohr are featured in the segment, "Ich hab' gelernt zu fragen." This film is included with the following book: Oliver von Wrochem and Christine Eckel, eds., *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaften: Nachwirkungen in Gesellschaft und Familie* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2016). I accessed this film at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

himself in connection with his relatives, social and political movements, and his own independent research about the Third Reich.

Similar layers of storytelling were present in narratives about the Holocaust in survivor families. Both survivors and perpetrators talked about the past to their grandchildren directly, in that they were open and upfront about their experiences; told indirect and partial stories that highlighted certain themes while obscuring others; and communicated details through unspoken means such as body language, gestures, habits, and objects. Grandchildren learned about the past from their parents in a range of ways as well. Some parents mediated conversations between the first and third generations, while others collaborated with the third generation to uncover their family history. Yet other members of the second generation refused to discuss the Holocaust with the third generation, to the point that parents cut off contact because of grandchildren's interest in the past. Put simply, survivor and perpetrator families narrated this history in similar ways, but there was no one way of talking about the past on either "side."

In scholarship, there are certain consensus regarding how survivors and perpetrators communicate details about the Holocaust to their grandchildren, but less so when it comes to how the second generation communicates the past to grandchildren. On the survivor side, some scholars believe that relationships between grandparents and grandchildren can be "solacing and liberating."⁴ Such meaningful grandparent-grandchild connections impact the transmission of family narratives. Child of survivors and literary scholar Eva Hoffman writes that many survivors "it appears, find it easier to speak about what they endured during the Holocaust to the grandchildren than their own children."⁵ Hoffman speculates that is the case because survivors

⁴ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 185.

⁵ Hoffman, 185.

are less concerned that they will pass on “guilt, fear, and sorrow” to the third generation due to the greater time that has passed since the Holocaust or because experiencing the restoration of the normal sequence of life, of having three generations alive at once, is affirming for them.⁶

This image of stories being handed down from the oldest generation to the youngest is reinforced by popular representations of survivors and their grandchildren that depict these generations having close, loving relationships that facilitate storytelling. However, scholars have also pushed back against the notion of such neat transmission of stories from survivors to their grandchildren. They have pointed out that what is passed on to the third generation are “‘bits and pieces’ of past episodes” rather than coherent narratives with clear lessons and legacies.⁷

Grandchildren’s own cultural productions, especially their (non)fictional novels about their family history, testify to the incompleteness of the narratives that were passed on to them.⁸

Survivor narratives have gaps in them not only because it is impossible to communicate every detail of the past, but also because there are certain topics they typically preferred to avoid discussing. Survivors refrained from mentioning themes that have been deemed shameful—by themselves and by others—including “collaboration” or “cooperation” with the Nazis, romantic relationships, sexual violence, torture to which they were subjected, and postwar psychological struggles.⁹ Based on the grandchildren of survivors discussed here, both perspectives on survivors’ communication to their grandchildren hold true. While some survivors offered their

⁶ Hoffman, 185. Ruth Wajnryb, an Australian linguist and the child of survivors, makes the same argument as Hoffman. Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (Allen & Unwin, 2001), 241.

⁷ Henry Greenspan, “On Testimony, Legacy and the Problem of Helplessness in History,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 13, no. 1 (2007): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2007.11087190>.

⁸ Victoria Aarons and Alan Berger, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

⁹ Walter Reich, “Unwelcome Narratives: Listening to Suppressed Themes in American Holocaust Testimonies,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 464-472. [Add additional citations]

grandchildren seemingly complete narratives of their experiences, others communicated only “bits and pieces,” and grandchildren had to fill in the gaps.

Though often overlooked in discussions of survivors and their grandchildren, the children's generation, or the second generation, also plays a role in this chain of transmission.¹⁰ The typical narrative of the second generation is that while the Holocaust was ever-present in their family home through their parents' body language, nightmares, and casual references, their parents did not talk explicitly about the Holocaust, and they were negatively affected by this lack of direct information.¹¹ Beginning in the 1970s, the children of survivors spoke publicly about these confusing experiences of childhood and early adulthood.¹²

The question of how the children of survivors have passed along details about their family history to the third generation has been given less attention in the scholarship. However, this question has preoccupied members of the second generation. At the First International Conference of Children of Holocaust Survivors, held in May 1984 in New York City, two sessions focused on this topic: “How and What Do We Tell Our Children About the Holocaust,” and “Teaching the Holocaust to Children in a Positive Perspective.”¹³ The literature of the second generation offers some potential answers as how they communicated the past to their children. According to Australian linguist and child of survivors Ruth Wajnryb, it was difficult for the second generation to transmit stories of the Holocaust because they lacked the proper

¹⁰ Sebastian Schirrmeister, “Von Lücken und Brücken: Leerstellen, Abwesenheiten und narrative Nähe in Texten der dritten Generation,” in *Yearbook of European Jewish Literature Studies* 10 (2023), 29.

¹¹ Arlene Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 54-59.

¹² Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses*, 75. Also see Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (Penguin Books, 1979, 2019). Epstein's book was one of the first about the experiences of the children of survivors.

¹³ First International Conference of Children of Holocaust Survivors, May 27-29, 1984, National Conference on Soviet Jewry Records, Box 51, Folder 11 and Box 228, Folder 1, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

language to do so. They had learned about the Holocaust from their parents through snippets in passing and nonverbal cues.¹⁴ This perspective was echoed by children of survivors who were not themselves scholars. For example, Miriam Goldstein addressed this topic in an address given for Yom HaShoah at Congregation Kehillath Israel in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1987.¹⁵ Goldstein reflected that because survivors refrained from talking to their children about the Holocaust, “many of the children of survivors who are best able to tell the story of their family and of the Holocaust to the next generation, cannot because they have not even heard their parents’ story.” Goldstein was concerned that this “dilemma” might not “ever be resolved.”

The children of survivors also grappled with wanting to inform and answer the questions of the third generation and trying preserve grandchildren’s innocent view of the world.¹⁶ Hoffman described this phenomenon as the second generation being the “hinge generation”—that is, the generation in which the memory of the Holocaust could become fixed and static, or in which it could be “transformed into new sets of relations with the world, and new understanding.”¹⁷ This description of the second generation implies that how they chose to communicate the past to their children had the potential to have an immense, hopefully positive, impact.

On the perpetrator side, the foundational understanding of how stories about the Third Reich are communicated in Germany families is based on Harald Welzer’s “*Opa war kein Nazi.*” Based on 142 interviews with 40 German families conducted in the late 1990s, Welzer argues that although the children and especially grandchildren of perpetrators are knowledgeable

¹⁴ Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (Allen & Unwin, 2001), 9-10.

¹⁵ One Generation After Newsletter, September 1987, Volume IX, Number 2, One Generation After (Boston) (4), Box 86, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY. Miriam Goldstein’s address is printed on page 6 of this newsletter.

¹⁶ Wajnryb, 188.

¹⁷ Hoffman, 103.

about the crimes of the Nazis, they adapt stories told by perpetrators to make them seem “good,” regardless of evidence that points to the contrary.¹⁸ Even when members of the perpetrator generation offer narrations that expose their criminality or present a very borderline “good” act, their descendants go through this process of making their parents or grandparents good again. As such, this effort is often a co-production of the second and third generations.¹⁹

Though Welzer's study emphasizes that families did talk about the Nazi period, other scholars have argued that the primary experience for the children and grandchildren of perpetrators was silence. Iris Wachsmuth, for example, writes that in some families, a tradition of avoiding and not asking questions was transmitted.²⁰ Interviews conducted with the children of Nazis in the 1980s by Peter Sichrovsky, a journalist and an Austrian Jew, and by Dan Bar-On, an Israeli psychologist, attest to this experience.²¹ Margit Reiter argues that this silence was even more pronounced in Austrian families because Austria lagged so far behind Germany in acknowledging their responsibility for the crimes of the Nazis. Along with accepting stories that made the perpetrator generation seem good and obliging them with avoiding discussion of the Holocaust, it took more time for the second generation in Austria to protest their parents' stories than it did for the second generation in Germany. While the second generation in Germany did so as part of the student movements of 1968, the Austrian second generation did not do so until

¹⁸ Welzer, 52-53.

¹⁹ Welzer, 16.

²⁰ Iris Wachsmuth, “Nationales versus individualisiertes Gedenken? Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Holocaust als offener Prozess,” in *Drei Generationen: Shoah und Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis*, ed. Martha Kiel and Philipp Mettau (Studien Verlag, 2016), 22.

²¹ Peter Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, trans. Jean Steinberg (New York: Basic Books, 1988). See “Anna: The Decent One,” “Rudolf: The Guilty One,” “Johannes: The Innocent One,” “Monika: The Believer,” and “Herbert.” Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989). The title of Bar-On's book reflects the fact that perpetrators often did not discuss the Holocaust or the Third Reich with their children.

the Waldheim Affair in 1986.²² Therefore, open and critical communication about the past in families is less established in Austria than in Germany.

For grandchildren in families of perpetrators, it seems that there was rarely “complete silence” about the past, but rather “not enough talk” about it.²³ Anthropologist Lina Jakob’s recent study of Kriegsenkel (“war grandchildren”), a subset of the third generation that describes themselves in terms of psychological struggles, argues that in their families, there was a spectrum of sharing and not sharing about the past. There were families who brushed aside questions about the war, families who repeated certain stories about their own suffering, and families who discussed only personal wartime stories and did not touch on the broader context in which they took place.²⁴ Interestingly, Jakob relies on Ruth Wajnryb’s framework of how survivor families talk about the past to describe the experiences of Kriegsenkel with their grandparents and parents. Jakob is explicit about the fact that, in so doing, she is not drawing comparisons between the descendants of survivors and the descendants of perpetrators but rather demonstrating that analytical tools developed to understand survivor families are useful to understand perpetrator families as well.²⁵

Here I go a step further than Jakob, arguing that there is a reason why analytical tools that explain the storytelling dynamics in survivor families shed light on those in perpetrator families. The narrative styles of grandparents and parents in both sets of families are similar, and these similarities deserve our attention. Though these parallels have been noted by scholars other than

²² Margit Reiter, “‘Tischgespräche’: Intergenerationelle Kommunikation über den Nationalsozialismus,” in *Die Lebendigkeit der Geschichte: (Dis)Kontinuitäten in Diskursen über den Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Eleonore Lappin and Bernhard Schneider (Röhrig, 2001), 12-13.

²³ Jakob, 47.

²⁴ Jakob, 48.

²⁵ Jakob, 48-49.

Draft: do not cite or quote without author's permission

Jakob²⁶ and by descendants of survivors and of perpetrators have in dialogue group settings,²⁷ they should be unpacked further. These commonalities raise an important question: Are there universal methods of communicating information about difficult, traumatic pasts within families, regardless of which side of the history one's family was on?

"Solacing and Liberating?"²⁸ Communication Between Grandparents and Grandchildren

Grandparents communicated with their grandchildren directly, indirectly or partially, and through nonverbal cues. The gender of the grandparents and grandchildren also affected these conversations, as it led survivors and perpetrators to be upfront about or obscure certain details of their experiences. It might seem that one common characteristic of this communication is missing in this discussion: taboos. This omission is intentional.

Regarding the grandchildren of perpetrators, it is often argued that certain topics were taboo in family conversations. These topics typically include "the grandparents' support for Hitler and National Socialist ideology, the grandfathers' involvement in active combat and war crimes, and experiences of sexual violence against women in the family."²⁹ In some families, even the word "Jew" might be taboo.³⁰ Though grandparents were rarely forthcoming about these topics with their grandchildren, the third generation could often sense when information

²⁶ See for example: Björn Krondorfer, *Remembrance and Reconciliation: Encounters Between Young Jews and Germans* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Gabriele Rosenthal, ed. *The Holocaust in Three Generations: Families of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi Regime* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998); Lucas F.W. Wilson and Alan L. Berger, "Introduction," in *Emerging Trends in Third-Generation Holocaust Literature*, ed. Lucas F.W. Wilson and Alan L. Berger (Lexington Books, 2023), xviii.

²⁷ See for example: Krondorfer, *Remembrance and Reconciliation*; Samson Munn, "Dialogue Toward Agencide: Recognizing the Other in the Context of Genocide," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 46, no. 3 (July 2006): 290, 10.1177/0022167806286280; Bobbie Goldman, "The Austrian Encounter," <https://nach.ws/#Depth>.

²⁸ Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, 185.

²⁹ Lina Jakob, *Echoes of Trauma and Shame in German Families: The Post-World War II Generations* (Indiana University Press, 2020), 57, ProQuest Ebook Central.

³⁰ Reiter, "Tischgespräche," 6-7.

was being held back and take educated guesses to read between the lines. This means that these themes were not actually taboo but were communicated to grandchildren in indirect and implicit ways. Returning to Jakob's framework, grandchildren of perpetrators typically experienced "not enough talk," rather than a complete lack of reference or discussion to the past.³¹

When it comes to the grandchildren of survivors, taboos are a less common point of discussion. Instead, a noticeable theme is that their grandparents like to be open and honest with them about their Holocaust experiences. According to this narrative, while survivors tended to avoid discussing this history explicitly with their children, doing so with their grandchildren is a meaningful and reparative process for survivors.³² Some grandchildren of survivors had this experience. After being interviewed for the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, one survivor, for example, started telling her grandchildren stories from her Holocaust survival every Friday night after family Shabbat dinners. In the words of this survivor's granddaughter, these storytelling sessions created "an ongoing conversation that became normalized."³³ But other grandchildren of survivors encountered similar situations as the grandchildren of perpetrators—that is, family conversations characterized by silence or information communicated in unclear, indirect, and implicit ways that were, at times, difficult to pick up on.

Direct Communication

Survivors and perpetrators, as well as their grandchildren, testify to the fact that there was open communication between these generations about the Holocaust and the Third Reich. From

³¹ Jakob, 51.

³² Hoffman, 185; Wajnryb, 241.

³³ Rachel F., interview by author, FaceTime, August 1, 2017. I interviewed Rachel F. for my undergraduate thesis at Williams College. Tamar Aizenberg, "Memory Becoming History: American Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors and Their Jewish Identity in the 21st Century" (BA thesis, Williams College, 2018), https://librarysearch.williams.edu/discovery/delivery/01WIL_INST:01WIL_SPECIAL/12288916350002786.

the perspective of survivors or perpetrators, their grandchildren approached them in a way that their parents had not done and asked to hear their stories. As a result, grandparents were willing to talk to their grandchildren. Grandchildren also noticed from their own perspective when their grandparents were interested in talking about the past with them. In these situations, grandchildren were appreciative of the fact that their grandparents were interested in talking about this history. It is worth noting that in many cases, one grandparent might be willing to discuss the past others would not. As Jakob notes, even just having one relative who was open was typically enough for grandchildren to feel like they had access to their family history and could develop a sense of connection to their family and the past.³⁴

Germans and Austrians who lived during the Third Reich spoke about the fact that their grandchildren asked them to talk about the past in ways that their children had not done. O.E.D. and P.S., who were both interviewed for the project *Final Account – Third Reich Testimonies*, a collection of interviews with men and women who lived during the Third Reich conducted by Luke Holland between 2008 and 2017, reflected on this experience.³⁵ O.E.D. volunteered for the Waffen-SS in his late teens or early twenties and served near Estonia.³⁶ He said that his granddaughter regularly asked him questions about the war. In his words, “My granddaughter who is fourteen years old, she comes and says, ‘Oh, Grandpa, tell me something. What was it like then? How did you come to this house? I don’t know. Was there a connection to Weimar? How did it happen?’ Then suddenly the questions come, yes, and like my children never asked.

³⁴ Jakob, 60.

³⁵ “Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies (archival collection),” UCL, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/collections/ucl-digital-collections/browse-collections/final-account-third-reich-testimonies>.

³⁶ October 7, 2008, FA 001M, Third Reich Testimonies, Creator: Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies is an archival project initiated and directed by Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) in association with University College London (UCL), the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (France) and Founding Partners, Pears Foundation. Interview accessed through a dedicated space on the INA’s professional video platform. I accessed the interview at the Wiener Holocaust Library, London, UK.

And the grandchildren ask these questions.” O.E.D.’s granddaughter was curious about his experiences, but his children were not interested in this history.

P.S. told a similar story. He was from North Rhine-Westphalia and living in Hesse, Germany, during the interview.³⁷ During the Nazi era, P.S. joined various Nazi organizations and fought for the Luftwaffe. In the postwar years, he had conflicts with his sons about his participation in the war. While P.S.’s sons claimed that his participating in the Nazi cause in any capacity made him guilty, P.S. took the stance that judging people in the context of a dictatorship was not so clear cut. To pass on his experiences from his own perspective, P.S. wrote a book for his grandchildren. After reading the book, one of P.S.’s grandchildren came to him and, like O.E.D.’s granddaughter, requested, “Grandpa, tell me something,” asking for more details about his life during the Third Reich.

I do not know how O.E.D. and P.S. responded to their grandchildren’s inquiries. Based on the context of the rest of their interviews, it is likely that O.E.D. acknowledged his complicity in the Nazis’ crimes and P.S. minimized his. P.S. using his book to pass on stories about the Third Reich based on excuses for his actions would be problematic, especially since some grandchildren are willing to accept their grandparents’ narratives uncritically.³⁸ Nonetheless, these examples show that there were grandchildren who asked their perpetrator grandparents to talk about the past, and some of these grandparents were happy to be asked and willing to fulfill the request.

³⁷ July 19, 2010, FA 040M, Third Reich Testimonies, Creator: Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies is an archival project initiated and directed by Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) in association with University College London (UCL), the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (France) and Founding Partners, Pears Foundation. Interview accessed through a dedicated space on the INA’s professional video platform. I accessed the interview at the Wiener Holocaust Library, London, UK.

³⁸ Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall, “*Opa war kein Nazi*,” 11.

Some grandchildren also attest to the fact that their perpetrator grandparents were open to speaking about the past. Tilman Taube, who was born in 1970 and lived in Münster, Germany, had this experience.³⁹ Tilman stumbled upon learning about his grandfather's past because of his longstanding interest in family history of other time periods. Tilman had "always" known that his grandfather, Heinz Baumkötter, had been in the S.S. from seeing photos of him in uniform in family albums. Tilman was also always aware that he was also a doctor. But he only learned about Baumkötter's involvement with the Nazis when he was once was digging through old family papers. Tilman came across a piece of paper that said that his grandfather had been imprisoned in the 1950s in Germany, asked his mother what this meant, and she explained, "Ah, well, there's this concentration camp history." She said that he was a doctor in several concentration camps and was prosecuted after the war.

Tilman was "shocked" upon learning this information and tried to do more research on what his grandfather might have done, but at the time, in the early 1990s, there was not much information available at the local library. So Tilman waited until his grandparents were out of town and went through papers in their garage until he found "a lot of material, mostly from his trials." Tilman took these papers home. Sometime later, Tilman confessed to his grandfather that he had uncovered these documents. His grandfather denied his criminality and claimed that the trial had been "somehow fake." As time went on, however, Tilman's grandfather "never expressed feeling any guilt for his crimes," but he did become willing to speak to Tilman about the Holocaust. In Tilman's words, "he freely told me, and he told me everything." By "everything," Tilman meant "factual stuff"—that is, answering questions like, "Who was living? Where? Whose office was where? Who did he meet? Who did he not meet? Where did he go?

³⁹ Tilman Taube, interview by author, Zoom, June 5, 2024.

Was he in Ravensbrück, did he ever go to Buchenwald?" From Tilman's perspective, his grandfather was willing to answer nearly any question about the Nazi era that he might have.

Though Baumkötter's actions and experiences during the Holocaust became a regular and open point of discussion between grandfather and grandson, it did not become that way between Tilman and his mother. Tilman would inform both his grandfather and mother when new material was published that related to Baumkötter, but overall, his mother "didn't really want to know." Even upon the publication of the Höcker album, a series of photos that depicted Nazi personnel from Auschwitz, including Baumkötter, enjoying their leisure time, Tilman's mother was not interested.⁴⁰ When he told her about this album, "she said, 'Okay, yeah, maybe it's not him, maybe. Thank you for telling me, but I don't want to know any more.'" The open conversations about the Holocaust thus remained confined to Tilman and his grandfather and did not expand to include members of other generations.

Grandchildren of survivors also spoke about open and regular conversations about the Holocaust in their families much in the same manner as Tilman did. Elena, for example, had two survivor grandparents, one of whom talked about the Holocaust often.⁴¹ Elena was born and raised in Vienna and was 49 years old at the time of the interview. Her grandmother rarely talked about her past; Elena referred to her as a "sealed book." All Elena knew about her grandmother was that she was from Bulgaria and had moved to Israel after the war with her mother and two sisters. Her grandmother only started to share minimal details about her history when she was in her nineties. Elena's grandfather was the opposite. According to Elena, "he wanted to talk about it a lot." She explained, he "was talking all the time about his story. He was always watching

⁴⁰ 2007.24, SS Auschwitz album, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn518658>.

⁴¹ Elena, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 17, 2024.

every documentary. He was giving a lot of interviews also.” In cases like Elena’s grandfather, survivors tended to recall specific incidents about the past repeatedly, rather than telling their longer life story. But Elena said that her grandfather regularly shared “the overall story” and “let us know everything,” implying that he would go into this past in-depth and at length.

Anna echoed similar sentiments as Elena.⁴² Like Elena, she was born and raised in Vienna, was living in Vienna at the time of the interview, and she was 35 years old at the time. All four of her grandparents were survivors, but Anna knew more about her maternal grandparents because she had a closer relationship to them. When I asked Anna if she knew any stories about her grandparents’ Holocaust survival, she responded, “loads, loads. Cuz it was always talked about, like it wasn’t a taboo.” Though she tended to hear more stories about her grandfather’s time in hiding because they sounded more adventurous and heroic than other family tales, her grandmother also spoke about her time as a prisoner in Theresienstadt concentration camp near Prague. In contrast to Elena, therefore, Anna had heard about both her grandfather’s and grandmother’s experiences throughout her life—not just her grandfather’s.

It is worth noting that though Tilman, Elena, and Anna described their grandparents as willing and interested in talking about the past with them, there were still limits to their grandparents’ openness in every case. Tilman’s grandfather would discuss “factual” information but would not admit wrongdoing or guilt. Elena’s grandfather spoke about the Holocaust, while her grandmother did not. Though the Holocaust was not a “taboo” in Anna’s family conversations, she still tended to hear more stories about her grandfather’s survival by hiding in Vienna in open sight. Such limitations to family storytelling are the topics of the remainder of this chapter.

⁴² Anna, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 16, 2024.

Indirect and Partial Communication

Indirect and partial communication between grandparents and grandchildren took on a variety of forms. First, grandchildren spoke about hearing snippets of their grandparents' stories during family gatherings. Rather than having a formal storytelling session with their grandparents, grandchildren picked up stories in this way. Grandchildren were also told kid-friendly stories that focused on the "good," "funny," or heroic aspects of their grandparents' stories and omitted the horror. Among grandchildren of perpetrators, this tendency to talk about the "good" parts of the war often extended to their grandparents framing themselves as "good"—that is, telling stories that made them seem like innocent victims of the Nazis rather than as perpetrators or devoted followers of the Party. This trend highlights the fact that the impact of survivor and perpetrator families communicating indirectly had different implications. For survivor families, doing so was a method for survivors to attempt to spare their family, and themselves, from reliving their pain and trauma. For perpetrators, however, this mode of storytelling at times allowed them to whitewash their involvement in the Nazi regime.

Snippets of Stories

Grandchildren picked up on hints of their grandparents' histories through casual remarks and conversations. In her memoir *After Such Knowledge*, child of survivors and literary scholar Eva Hoffman writes about her experience with learning about her parents' survival in this way. For Hoffman, and for other members of the second generation, the Holocaust and its impact was ever-present in their homes. Hoffman reflected, "the overwhelming experiences, still palpably present, kept breaking through into the ordinary day." "It was a chaos of emotion that emerged

from their words rather than any coherent narration,” Hoffman explained.⁴³ Though grandchildren of survivors describe a similar kind of narratives that break through the “ordinary” and defy coherence, the intensity with which Hoffman experienced her parents’ past was not typically present for the third generation. The distance made this history present, but less urgent.

Simon and Linda, both grandchildren of survivors, described how the Holocaust would “break through” in their family conversations. Simon was from Vienna and was 33 years old at the time of the interview. Growing up, he remembered being “around” when adults and older cousins in his family would discuss the Holocaust.⁴⁴ Simon explained, “it was always present, but there was not, like, the one moment where they revealed it or told about it.” As Simon got older and learned about the Holocaust through his Jewish youth movement and his school, he engaged more in these family conversations. Simon added, “it was always there, floating around, we were asking questions, sometimes more, sometimes less. And just listening to it. That’s how we got aware of it.” In that way, Simon was always aware of the presence of the Holocaust in family conversations, though it was not a dominant topic in the manner that it was for children of survivors like Hoffman.

Linda described a similar situation to Simon.⁴⁵ Linda’s father and paternal grandparents were survivors, while her mother and her maternal grandparents were Japanese Americans and had been interned in the United States during World War II. When I asked how Linda knew about her family history, she responded, “we were always knowledgeable about our family history on both sides. And had little reminders of that growing up, here and there they would come out. Manifest.” Unlike Simon, she had no memories of talking about the Holocaust directly

⁴³ Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, 9.

⁴⁴ Simon, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 14, 2024.

⁴⁵ Linda, interview by author, Zoom, November 30, 2023.

with her grandparents, only with her father and her aunt. But one way in which her grandparents' Holocaust survival "manifested" itself in her family was through random comments here and there. For example, Linda remembered once lying to her mother when she was seven or eight years old, and her mother said, "you know, you really shouldn't lie unless you're a Jew and the Nazis are at your door." Linda admitted that this line continued to impact her throughout her entire life. She confessed, "to this day, when, every time I tell a little fib, I always think of that." Linda's mother's comment was a less explicit reference to her grandparents' Holocaust survival than Simon's family talking about the Holocaust casually during family gatherings, but it had the same effect of remaining with her for her entire life.

As has been noted in the context of the grandchildren of non-Jewish Germans and Austria, obscure remarks, throwaway lines, and short life lessons are a means of indirect communication in families.⁴⁶ Indeed, grandchildren of perpetrators made similar observations as Simon and Linda. Margarete, for example, said that growing up in Germany in the 1960s, her family did not talk about the fact that her paternal grandfather had been a "convinced National Socialist" and her father had volunteered for the Waffen-S.S. at age eighteen.⁴⁷ Still, Margarete was aware of this history. She said, "this wasn't clearly communicated in my family, there were always just hints." Monika, too, knew that her family had been involved with the Nazi Party although her relatives did not explicitly talk about this history with her.⁴⁸ She commented, "I would have to say that when I grew up, I sort of knew that, of course, my grandmother was sort of involved in the National Socialist system." When Monika asked her grandmother "quite directly" if she had known about the deportations of Jews, her grandmother gave her "a very

⁴⁶ Jakob, 51-55.

⁴⁷ Margarete, interview by author, Zoom, August 7, 2023.

⁴⁸ Monika, interview by author, Hamburg, Germany, July 14, 2023.

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strict view back.” Monika then knew, “I was not intended to ask anything else about that.” Like Margarete, Monika had a sense of what her family had known about and been implicated in despite this information being communicated to her in indirect and intangible ways.

Child-Friendly Stories

Along with mentions of the Third Reich and the Shoah “floating around” in families, grandchildren also heard stories from their grandparents that glossed over the realities of the time. For example, grandparents told grandchildren stories that they deemed to be child-friendly, in that they were entertaining and not too horrific. Accounts from survivors and perpetrators, as well as their grandchildren, testify to this mode of communication. For instance, Holocaust survivors Kenneth and Helen Hartoch wrote first-person stories of their Holocaust survival in this way for their grandson Sam.⁴⁹ Because Kenneth and Helen made these books in 2013, when Sam was around six years old, they were written in a simple, accessible style. This is clear from the beginning of Kenneth’s two-page text. He writes: “A long time ago, your Grandpa was born in Germany, a pretty country in Europe. When I was a young boy, Germany was ruled by a very bad man, whose name was Adolf Hitler. He hated all Jews and many other people.” This opening makes Kenneth’s text sound like an adventurous fairytale centering around the classic battle of good versus evil.

The main contents of Kenneth’s story are his memories of witnessing Kristallnacht as a child. He explains what happened on this night: the synagogue in his hometown of Cologne was set on fire and Nazi stormtroopers were “smashing the Jewish homes.” But then he gives the

⁴⁹ “A True Story for Sam, from his Grandpa Ken Hartoch,” 2013, Jewish Museum Berlin Archive, Berlin, Germany; “A true story for Same” von Helen Hartoch geb. Gundelfinger (1930-2016), 2013, Jewish Museum Berlin Archive, Berlin, Germany.

story a happy ending. For Kenneth, the “good news” was that his father, Sam’s great-grandfather, decided the family had to leave Germany and came to “this great country, the United States of America.” This these narrative choices give Kenneth’s story a clear arc: he had a good childhood, the Nazis took over and destroyed Jewish life in Germany, and then Kenneth and his family escaped to the United States, and all was well. Kenneth’s story omits the more horrific details of Kristallnacht, such as the fact that Jewish men were rounded up and deported to concentration camps, and the difficulties of immigrating to a new country. Kenneth might have deemed these details inappropriate for his grandchild, especially one who was six years old.

Even as adults, grandchildren of survivors recalled kid-friendly stories that their grandparents had told them. They wondered if they were accurate portrayals of their grandparents’ experiences or if these stories obscured their grandparents’ suffering. Growing up, Beth’s grandmother would tell Beth and her sister “bedtime stories” about the Holocaust.⁵⁰ Beth’s grandparents had escaped from Vienna and survived the war in the south of France, first in hiding and then interned in a work camp. In these “bedtime stories,” rather than telling them the “bad details,” Beth’s grandmother “would always talk about how she would look after the boys.” Beth’s grandmother told them stories about one boy in particular: “little Lulu, who was always getting into trouble.”

As a child, Beth thought these “boys” were in some kind of camp, but as she reflected on the story as an adult, she questioned who they were. She wondered, “I don’t know if they were orphans or what, but there were all these boys that she would take care of.” Beth had also found these stories “romantic” and “sweet” as “bedtime stories,” but looking back on them, Beth asked, “I have no idea if little Lulu was made up? Or did he survive? No idea.” Just considering the

⁵⁰ Beth, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, November 2, 2023.

possibility that these “boys” may have been orphans in a work camp who may not have survived the Holocaust gives these “bedtime stories” a much darker undertone. Rather than entertaining her granddaughters, Beth’s grandmother could have been memorializing boys she once treated like her children or grandchildren.

Other grandchildren of survivors had this experience of hearing cute or adventurous stories about their grandparents as children and then realizing that they had a deeper meaning.⁵¹ Shari’s eulogy for her survivor-grandmother, Susan Schulman, reflected this fact.⁵² Susan was born in Berlin in 1918 and fled Germany with her family in 1933 to Italy and then Palestine. She then moved to London at the end of the war. Shari was raised in Needham, Massachusetts, and gave a eulogy at Susan’s funeral in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 2008. In the eulogy, Shari reflected:

I felt most connected to Grandma Susan when she shared her personal memories of her long ago girlhood. She would recount anything I asked about in great detail, from upheaval to adventuring to settling down in a foreign land. I was always fascinated by the adventures themselves (living on an island paradise at age 15 instead of the boring suburbia I knew), and would marvel at the wholly different childhoods we had. Shari’s language shows that she at one point regarded her grandmother’s escape from Germany and survival elsewhere as an exciting event. She refers to her grandmother “adventuring” rather than fleeing and “living on an island paradise,” which sounds like Susan went on vacation, not that she sought refuge.

As Shari grew older, however, her relationship to her grandmother’s stories changed. In Shari’s words, Susan’s “stories and strength took on greater meaning.” Though Shari had once viewed Susan’s childhood as one of “adventure,” she came to understand that it also involved “great pain and sorrow” as well as “overcoming adversity.” She realized that her grandmother’s

⁵¹ Other grandchildren I interviewed touched on this theme: Anna Goldenberg, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 16, 2024; Mira, interview by author, Zoom, October 23, 2023.

⁵² About my life (snippets from a life well-lived), Wiener Holocaust Library, London, UK.

“strength” made her a powerful “activist” and “advocate for others.” Shari and Beth thus went through similar processes: they enjoyed their grandparents’ sweet and exciting stories as children, but as adults, they questioned the context and suffering behind these tales.

Grandchildren of perpetrators were also told stories deemed age-appropriate by their grandparents when they were growing up. The implications of perpetrators doing so is, of course, different than survivors. While survivors sought to protect their grandchildren from their trauma or pain, perpetrators also wanted to obscure their involvement in the Nazi regime and potentially even their participation in crimes. Gabrielle’s grandfather, who served in the S.S., for example, only told her “funny stories” about the war until she pushed him to tell her more when she was in her twenties.⁵³ Gabrielle explained that these “funny stories” went something like this: “So when he, when we were in Holland and there they, so they stole a cow, and it was so funny. And in Greece, there was a donkey there, and there was a farmer, he rode on the donkey, and there were so many eggs, and he was so afraid that all of the eggs fell.” These kinds of stories about animals and local characters her grandfather encountered were, Gabrielle said, “the stories of my childhood.” They made his war service sound like an exciting, entertaining adventure rather than participation in a criminal war. Thus, the child-friendly stories told by both survivors and perpetrators obscured their pain and suffering from their grandchildren. In the case of perpetrators, however, doing so also prevented their grandchildren from understanding their implication in the crimes of the Nazis—a central aspect of their wartime experiences.

Heroic Tales

⁵³ Gabrielle, interview by author, Altmünster, Austria, June 7, 2024.

In addition to telling “funny” stories, both survivors and perpetrators told their grandchildren stories that made themselves seem heroic. Grandchildren assumed that their grandparents did so because they wanted to be regarded well by their descendants, but in both cases, this storytelling strategy overshadowed or obscured grandparents’ morally questionable actions. As with the child-friendly stories, survivors and perpetrators framing themselves as heroes when some of their actions may have also been questionable has different implications. Survivors made questionable choices ensure their survival, as well as that of their loved ones. When perpetrators did so, they were typically participating in a criminal regime or war.

Madeline, an American grandchild of a survivor living in Connecticut, was particularly conscious of the fact that her maternal grandmother told stories that painted herself in a positive light.⁵⁴ Madeline spoke explicitly about this theme, saying, “I also think that many of my grandma’s stories involved acts of sacrifice on her part. Of doing things to save her family members. Stories where she’s could, you know, would come off as heroic or compassionate, which she was in many ways. I think there are also stories that are less flattering, and some of those, I, you know, she has written down, others I will probably never know.” Madeline illustrated this observation by offering two examples of stories that her grandmother “retold again and again.”

In the first story, Madeline’s grandmother, who survived the Holocaust by hiding in Budapest, Hungary, by hiding in a convent, talked about procuring food rations by using false papers that said she was a Christian woman. One day, her grandmother realized that the female Nazi in charge of distributing the rations had previously been her school bully, and she was certain the bully would recognize and catch her. But a policeman who saw Madeline’s

⁵⁴ Madeline, interview by author, Zoom, December 8, 2024.

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grandmother in line “wanted to flirt” with her, which meant that she was blocked from the view of the bully-turned-Nazi. This story portrays Madeline’s grandmother as brave because she broke the law by using false papers and stayed in line to get food despite the possibility of being caught. It also makes her seem resourceful; she might have indicated to the policeman that she was interested in flirting with him as a strategy to avoid the bully’s attention.

Second, Madeline said that her grandmother often told a story about saving her father’s—Madeline’s great-grandfather’s—life. Her father had been living in a Swiss safe house in Budapest, that is, a house that had been annexed by the Swiss legation in Budapest so that the Jews in them could not be targeted by the Nazis. Between March 1944 and February 1945, Swiss vice-consul Carl Lutz issued passes to and placed Jews in such houses.⁵⁵ At some point, Madeline’s grandmother heard rumors that the Jews in these protected houses were being seized by the Nazis and their collaborators and shot directly into the Danube River. So, Madeline’s grandmother acted. In the middle of the night, she went to retrieve her father and took him to hide in the seminary across the street from her convent. Madeline described how her grandmother narrated this event:

She would talk about being on a bus and trying to, you know, keep a low profile as they were coming back. They obviously didn’t wear the star. They didn’t have their papers. And they saw somebody that they recognized get on the bus and thought it was the end. But, you know, were able to kind of scoot off. And then she would talk about, it was snowing, and she would talk about walking, and then covering up her footsteps behind her with snow, so they wouldn’t be able to see where they were walking. Even more so than the story about evading the bully, this one made Madeline’s grandmother seem heroic, brave, and adventurous. Despite the obvious risks to her, Madeline’s grandmother took the chance to save her father’s life.

⁵⁵ Agnes Hirschi and Charlotte Schallié, “Introduction,” in *Under Swiss Protection: Jewish Eyewitness Accounts from Wartime Budapest*, ed. Agnes Hirschi and Charlotte Schallié (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2017), 15.

Though Madeline heard stories involving “acts of sacrifice” from her grandmother growing up, after her grandmother passed away in 2013, Madeline learned a particularly “less flattering” story her grandmother had hidden from her family. At this time, when Madeline was 21 years old, her mother shared her grandmother’s greatest secret. When her grandmother was in a displaced person’s camp after the war near Munich, Germany, she met and eventually married a non-Jewish American soldier. Madeline does not know if her grandmother loved this soldier or wanted to marry him, but her grandmother’s brother advised her to marry him because it was a clear way for her to immigrate to the United States and sponsor the rest of the family to join her there.⁵⁶ Madeline’s grandmother followed her brother’s advice and became a so-called “war bride”: she married the soldier and moved to a city on the Texas-Mexico border with him. There, she was “extremely, extremely unhappy.” She tried running away, but her husband found her and brought her home. Even after she had a son, Madeline’s grandmother tried running away again but could not take care of her son on the road. So, she returned home, left her son with her husband, fled Texas, reunited with her family in New York City, and eventually remarried.⁵⁷ She never spoke of this period of her life to her second husband or her other children until her estranged son tracked her down several decades later, which led to a host of problems and conflicts with her second family.

This story about Madeline’s grandmother’s first marriage portrays her in a less positive light. Madeline’s retelling implies that her grandmother may have married the American soldier

⁵⁶ In December 1945, the US Congress passed emergency legislation allowing the spouses of American military personnel to circumvent immigration quotas. In 1946, the Alien Fiancées and Fiancés Act extended this law for three years and allowed such spouses to enter the country as nonimmigrants. Robin Judd, *Between Two Worlds: Jewish War Brides After the Holocaust* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 5-6.

⁵⁷ Some Jewish war brides found it stressful to become pregnant so soon after experiencing such immense trauma and found it difficult to go through without parental guidance. Their American spouses often did not understand the distress they were experiencing, both during pregnancy and beyond, and found this adjustment to be difficult and isolating. Judd, 132-134. Judd found that divorce was uncommon among Jewish war brides, in part because they typically had no other family or previous home to return to—unlike Madeline’s grandmother. Judd, 157.

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for visas for her and her family, meaning that her grandmother married this man for his citizenship and protection rather than out of love. She also left her son with this soldier, which goes against the societal expectation that mothers should remain with and take care of their children, especially as infants. In sum, this story is not about Madeline's grandmother using her cleverness to help others; it is about her being a flawed human being who was doing her best to take care of herself and her family.⁵⁸

Grandchildren of perpetrators also reported hearing narratives of their grandparents' heroism or resistance. They were told stories about how their grandparents supposedly helped Jews in Nazi Germany, which their grandparents told them to demonstrate that they were not in complete agreement with the regime's persecution of the Jews. This situation came across in a conversation recorded between grandparent and grandchild for the *Final Account – Third Reich Testimonies* project. H.Sa., the interviewee, had lived in Berlin and joined the Wehrmacht in November 1938. He participated in the invasion of Poland in 1939 before returning to Berlin in January 1940 to study medicine through the army in Berlin. H.Sa. was interviewed twice for this project: once alone and once with his granddaughter present. Noticeably, he made a story about an incident with a Jewish woman during the Nazi era sound more impressive when telling this narrative in his granddaughter's presence.

In the private interview, H.Sa. described the incident as follows: He once boarded a tram in Berlin and saw a Jewish woman being harassed for sitting in a tram seat.⁵⁹ According to H.Sa.,

⁵⁸ Other grandchildren of survivors I interviewed said that their grandparents tended to tell them stories that made them seem like heroes, especially: Anna Goldenberg, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 16, 2024; Mira, interview by author, Zoom, October 23, 2023.

⁵⁹ January 31, 2013, FA 206M, Third Reich Testimonies, Creator: Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies is an archival project initiated and directed by Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) in association with University College London (UCL), the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (France) and Founding Partners, Pears Foundation. Interview accessed through a dedicated space on the INA's professional video platform. I accessed the interview at the Wiener Holocaust Library, London, UK.

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he could tell this woman was Jewish because she was wearing a yellow star badge and looked like a Jew. Non-Jewish Germans on the tram insisted that she get up and give the seat to someone else. This kind of incident was repeated throughout Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶⁰ But H.Sa. found the encounter so disturbing that he got off the tram at the next stop.

In the interview with his granddaughter, S.Mr., which took place about three months later, H.Sa. changed his narrative to make himself sound more heroic.⁶¹ H.Sa. explained that he lived in Prenzlauer Berg, a neighborhood of Berlin that had a large Jewish population in the years before the Holocaust. The incident on the tram occurred when he was around fifteen or sixteen years old. H.Sa. was on a tram when he saw an elderly Jewish woman get on, and he gave up his seat for her. He knew she was Jewish because she was wearing a yellow star badge. The other passengers were so angry at H.Sa. for offering his seat to a Jew that he got off the tram at the next stop.

There are several historical and narrative inconsistencies in these two versions of this story. From a historical perspective, if H.Sa. was fifteen or sixteen at the time of this incident and joined the Wehrmacht in 1938, this encounter must have occurred around 1935 or 1936. Jews in Germany were required to wear the yellow star beginning in September 1941, however, which means the woman would not have been doing so in the 1930s.⁶² When the interviewer pointed

⁶⁰ For example, Toni Haber, a Jewish doctor living in Berlin at the same time, once sat in a nearly empty streetcar at late at night. This was after 1941, when Jews were required to wear yellow stars and most Jews were banned from using public transit. The report on Haber reads, "Immediately, a young man jumped up from his seat and threatened her, screaming, 'Get off the streetcar, filthy Jew!' Dead tired as she was, she fled to the platform, got out at the next stop, and, standing, took a later train home." Six anonymous reports on the persecution of Jewish people in Berlin, September 1955, Testifying to the Truth: Eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, The Wiener Holocaust Library, London, UK. [Add citations from Marion Kaplan, and others]

⁶¹ March 17, 2013, FA 207MF, Third Reich Testimonies, Creator: Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies is an archival project initiated and directed by Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd.) in association with University College London (UCL), the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (France) and Founding Partners, Pears Foundation. Interview accessed through a dedicated space on the INA's professional video platform. I accessed the interview at the Wiener Holocaust Library, London, UK.

⁶² Reinhard Heydrich decreed that all Jews in the Reich ages six and older were required to wear a yellow Star of David with the word "Jew" on it. This decree was issued on September 1, 1941, and applied to Jews in Germany and

this fact out to H.Sa. in the second interview, H.Sa. insisted like he did in the first one that the woman looked “so Jewish.” Even if she was not wearing the yellow star, everyone on the tram, including him, could identify her as such. H.Sa. did not seem to realize that asserting that he could identify Jews simply by their appearance was an antisemitic claim.

H.Sa. also changed several narrative elements when he told the story with his granddaughter present. He specified that the Jewish woman was elderly, making her seem like a more sympathetic character, and gave himself a central role in the incident. Rather than watching the Jewish woman being harassed, H.Sa. stood up for this woman and himself was the subject of the harassment. H.Sa. implied that he was willing to take a public stand for values he believed in. It was clear from the video that grandfather and granddaughter had a close relationship. As the interviewer said thank you and goodbye at the end of the interview, H.Sa. and S.Mr. were holding hands. It thus follows that H.Sa. changed the story about this elderly Jewish woman to increase his respect and standing in his granddaughter's eyes. This story created the narrative that although H.Sa. had joined the Wehrmacht, he had not actually been prejudiced against Jews.

Grandparents telling tales that made them seem more heroic came across from grandchildren's perspectives as well. Gertrud, who was living in Kiel, Germany, at the time of our interview, heard stories from her grandmother about Nazi Germany that made her family seem like they aided Jews.⁶³ Gertrud said that her great-grandfather, her grandmother's father, “bought a company which was owned by Jews.” Gertrud explained: “he was a young apprentice there, and during the war he was already a partner, and he tried to help them flee from Germany, and he bought the company before they could flee. And I know that the one couple could flee,

in Germany's annexed territories (Alsace, Bohemia-Moravia, and the Warthegau). United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Jewish Badge: During the Nazi Era,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-badge-during-the-nazi-era>, accessed on August 8, 2025.

⁶³ Gertrud, interview by author, Zoom, September 2, 2023.

they could make it to England, but that the others they don't know about them." This story was always the "example" that Gertrud's grandmother used to show that her family "tried to help" Jews.

Gertrud said that her grandmother's logic was "absurd." She should have been aware of the persecution of the Jews and known that buying a company from them was not a form of assistance, but rather was the unjust expropriation of their property. It does seem, however, that Gertrud bought into her grandmother's narrative of heroism to an extent. She suggested that her great-grandfather not only bought the company from the Jews, but also "tried to help them flee from Germany"—which, unlike forcibly dispossessing Jews of their assets, would be a form of genuine assistance and resistance. Given Gertrud's grandmother's interest in claiming that her family helped Jews, it seems unlikely that the family helped Jews escape; if they had, Gertrud's grandmother would have probably wanted to tell her granddaughter about her family's bravery. Though Gertrud took a critical stance toward her grandmother, she still had a glimmer of desire that her great-grandfather had, indeed, "tried to help" Jews.

Gertrud's story thus highlights the phenomenon of "cumulative heroization" developed by Harald Welzer. This concept describes the fact that grandchildren frame their Nazi grandparents as heroes. Welzer explains, "plots are rearranged so as to reduce the nuanced, ambivalent, often troubling tales by the eyewitnesses to a morally clear attitude on the part of the protagonist—a clearly positive one."⁶⁴ Though Gertrud did not go so far as to excuse her grandmother's behavior during or attitudes about the Nazi regime during the remainder of the interview, in this instance, she was willing to take part in the "heroization" of her family. In

⁶⁴ Harald Welzer, "Collateral Damage of History Education: National Socialism and the Holocaust in German Family Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 301, 10.1353/sor.2008.0049.

some families of perpetrators, families not only heroized their grandparents, but also told stories that overlooked their participation in the Nazis' war.

Glorifying the war

In German and Austrian families, grandparents told their grandchildren tales that glorified the war, minimized their involvement in it, or emphasized their suffering during it. These narrative strategies served the same purpose as heroization: they made the eyewitness generation seem like they were not “true” Nazis, even when they were. Margarete, whose grandfather and father were both involved in the Nazi regime, similarly said that her father “spoke a lot about the war, but never about the ideology”—even though he had volunteered for the S.S. at age eighteen.⁶⁵ Instead, “he spoke about battles, about heroism, about camaraderie, about the loss of territories.” These stories glorified the war and emphasized the suffering of Germans who had to fight.

Tilman's grandfather, too, would tell him the “usual story about Russia” before Tilman became more interested in his family history.⁶⁶ In this story, Tilman's grandfather was so close to Moscow that “through these rabbit ear binoculars you could already see the Kremlin towers blinking.” But then, “came the rain and the frost and the mud. And then it got ugly.” When he was a child, the question Tilman would always follow up with was, “when you were in the war, did you shoot somebody?” To which his grandfather would always answer, “No, no, I didn't have to. I was a doctor.” Based on this oft-repeated story, Tilman assumed that his grandfather had been “with some kind of S.S. division, in the fighting troops”—not that he had been an S.S. doctor at concentration camps, as he learned later.

⁶⁵ Margarete, interview by author, Zoom, August 7, 2023.

⁶⁶ Tilman Taube, interview by author, Zoom, June 5, 2024.

Like Tilman assuming his grandfather had a lesser role in the Nazi army because of the story about Russia, other grandchildren of perpetrators spoke about being told that their grandfathers had had minimal roles in the Nazi regime but later learning that their roles had been more significant and violent. This mode of storytelling further emphasized the idea that their grandparents had fun, adventurous experiences at war rather than gruesome ones. Christine Holch, for example, had always been told that her grandfather was “just a translator.” Based on her own research, she not only found out that he had been an early and devoted Nazi, but also that being a “translator” had likely involved conducting interrogations and executions of prisoners.⁶⁷ Peter Mahler was told a comparable story by his family.⁶⁸ His grandfather and great-grandfather had both been members of the S.S., the latter with the rank of Obersturmführer. But in Peter's family, his great-grandfather was presented as “an inventor, a teacher, that is, he was a middle-school teacher, chemistry professor.” According to this narrative, Peter's great-grandfather “had invented something great, which was relevant in war”—a battery of some kind. Because of this invention, the story continued, he “had been given this honorary S.S. title.” But when Peter conducted his own research, he found that, like Christine's grandfather, his great-grandfather had been an early member of the Nazi Party and received the title because of his devotion to the cause. Peter's great-grandfather was thus not just an inventor or a teacher—he was a committed Nazi. As with the funny stories and the heroic stories, such narratives served to obscure their active involvement in the Nazi regime.

German and Austrian suffering

⁶⁷ Christine Holch, interview by author, Frankfurt, Germany, July 24, 2023. This name is not a pseudonym.

⁶⁸ Peter Mahler, interview by author, Vienna, Austria, June 13, 2024. This name is not a pseudonym.

Along with stories that made it seem like fighting for the Nazis in World War II had redeeming qualities, grandchildren were told stories that centered on the suffering of non-Jewish Germans and Austrians because of the war. Matthias told a story along these lines that, like Gabrielle's grandfather's stories, came across as "funny."⁶⁹ Matthias's maternal grandfather was stationed at a concentration camp during the war, though he did not learn about his crimes until he was around ten years old. Matthias spoke about his grandparents' actions with his mother only once in his life. In contrast, his mother often told her children about living through bombings of German cities and hunger—common themes discussed in German families, particularly by women.⁷⁰ When I asked Matthias if there were any specific stories about these themes that he could share, he started laughing and then told the following story about his mother's brother: "he wanted to eat enough once. And then he just took the little bread they had left and collected it in a cupboard so he could eat his fill. And then he wanted to do that and then the entire bread got moldy." Matthias laughed more and added, "this she [his mother] told all the time."

There are several reasons why Matthias's mother would tell this story rather than others. First, it is funny and portrays Matthias's uncle, and the whole family, as innocent. Second, the story omits the broader context that would explain why the family was hungry, including the fact that the parents were actively involved in the Nazis' crimes. Third, the story makes Matthias's family seem like victims of the war. Of course, his mother and uncle were children at the time and were not perpetrators; they suffered because of their parents' beliefs, choices, and actions. Though the children were victims of their situation, Matthias's grandparents were not. Without the proper context, this entertaining story obscures this a vital fact.

⁶⁹ Matthias, interview by author, Zoom, November 8, 2023.

⁷⁰ Roger Frie, *Not in My Family: German Memory and Responsibility After the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 113-116; Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall, "Opa war kein Nazi," 85.

In some cases, it is clear from the grandparents' perspective as well that they wanted to preserve a simpler, more innocent image of themselves for their grandchildren. A particularly interesting example of this phenomenon is a letter written by Günter B. L. Fettweis to his granddaughter, Lisa, in 1999.⁷¹ That year, Lisa participated in a high school exchange from her home in Austria to Duxbury, Massachusetts. While she was there, she decided to do a project for her history class on "S.S. and concentration camps" and asked her grandparents if they would be willing to share any firsthand information with her about their experiences of living through that time. Günter, who was 75 years old at the time and living in Leoben, Austria, obliged her request and recorded his story for Lisa.

The tone of Günter's narrative is exculpatory. Though he joined the Wehrmacht in 1942, Günter argues that he was unaware of the Nazis' crimes, including the Holocaust, and that he also suffered because of the war. There are three moments when these arguments especially shine through. First, like Christine's and Peter's families, Günter framed himself as a normal, nonviolent, non-ideological member of the military. Günter served on the Western front in France, Belgium, and Holland and so only heard about the atrocities committed on the Eastern front. Because he was so distant from these atrocities, he writes, "The war in the west was a normal war, fought according to the rules of warfare, apart from things that happened on both sides."⁷² However, the German forces massacred Allied forces in the West on multiple occasions.⁷³

⁷¹ Günter B.L. Fettweis, *Erinnerungen an die NS-Zeit, 1999 and 2002*, Manuskripte: Erinnerungen, Erlebnisberichte, (Auto)Biographisches, Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin, Munich, Germany.

⁷² Fettweis, 10

⁷³ For example, in December 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, Waffen-SS units captured and murdered more than 80 American soldiers and Belgian prisoners, an incident known as the "Malmedy Massacre." "The Malmedy Massacre," Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-malmedy-massacre>. [Add additional citations]

Similarly, Günter claims that he was not particularly devoted to the Nazi cause. He explains that while he was overjoyed at the possibility of Hitler being murdered in the July 20, 1944, plot, others around him “were really much more strongly indoctrinated through Goebbels’s propaganda and they also condemned this putsch in contrast to my person and in contrast to many others.”⁷⁴ Thus, Günter’s distance from Nazi atrocities and lack of commitment to the Nazi cause meant that he was not culpable for his involvement in the regime.

Günter also told stories that framed himself as a victim. One story where this stands out is when Günter juxtaposes the persecution of the Jews of Europe with his own supposed suffering as a member of the German military. He writes:

Now very important—in this place I make mention of the matter that this systematic (murder of the Jews)—believe in 1942 or 43 this so-called Final Solution began. This organized murder was not known in the population. There may have been many people involved who possibly knew, but overall it was not known. I repeat: the organized murder was not known. What was, of course, known was the matter that the Jews were being taken to the East. And I myself had a very traumatic experience. In 1943 I first joined the military.⁷⁵

Aside from claiming that he was unaware of the murder of the Jews of Europe, which scholars have shown ordinary Germans and Austrians knew about,⁷⁶ in this section, Günter connects the deportation of Jews to his joining the military. Immediately after writing that he knew that Jews were being sent to “the East,” he writes that he had “a very traumatic experience.” This sudden shift from referencing the horrific experiences of Jews’ suffering to describing Günter’s own trauma implies that Günter’s trauma was either comparable to or worse than that of the Jews. It also brushes aside the importance of the Jewish experience in this history, putting Günter’s “traumatic experience” front and center. Günter’s account shows that the way grandchildren

⁷⁴ Fettweis, 11.

⁷⁵ Fettweis, 7.

⁷⁶ See for example Peter Fritzsche, “Babi Yar, But Not Auschwitz: What Did Germans Know about the Final Solution?” *The Germans and the Holocaust: Popular Responses to the Persecution and Murder of the Jews*, ed. Susanna Schrafstetter and Alan E. Steinweis (Berghahn Books, 2015), 85-104. ProQuest Ebook Central.

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received stories from their grandparents that oversimplified or obscured the realities of the time was also sometimes a result of how the grandparents told the stories.